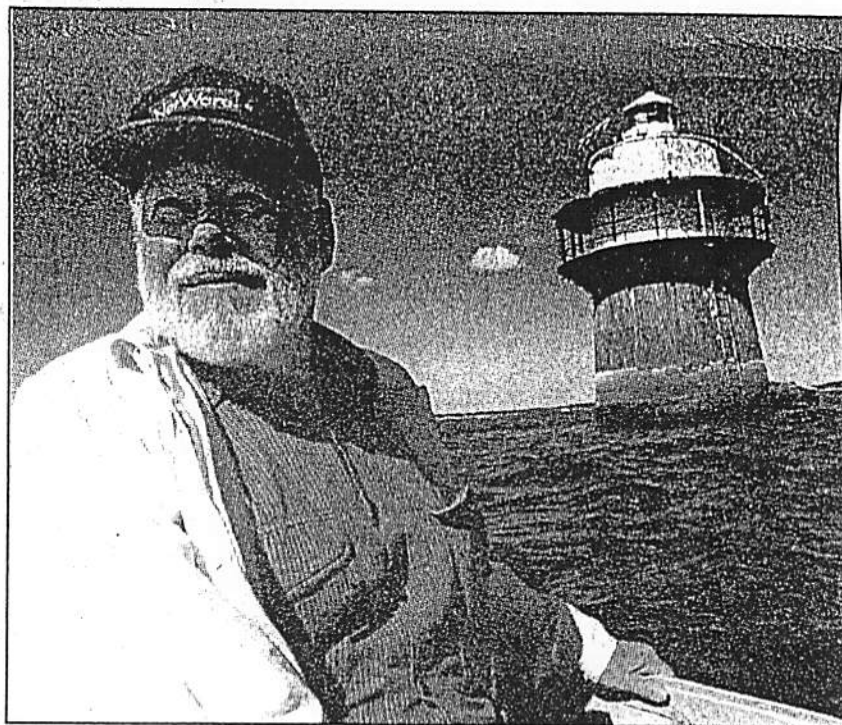


DUXBURY HISTORY FILE  
REFERENCE

# Bug Light weathers the years



Harry Salter of Kingston has written a memoir about Bug Light (background).

By Jeff McLaughlin  
GLOBE STAFF

**K**INGSTON — The first time the young Coast Guardsman saw Duxbury Pier Light, known widely hereabouts as Bug Light, he was anything but thrilled.

"By no stretch of the imagination would it win any beauty contest," 75-year-old Harry Salter of Kingston wrote in "The Keeper of Bug Light," the memoir he has just published in pamphlet form.

Salter spent a year living aboard the light during World War II — a tour of duty that included harrowing experiences when the light was hammered by ferocious winds and seas during the September hurricane of 1944.

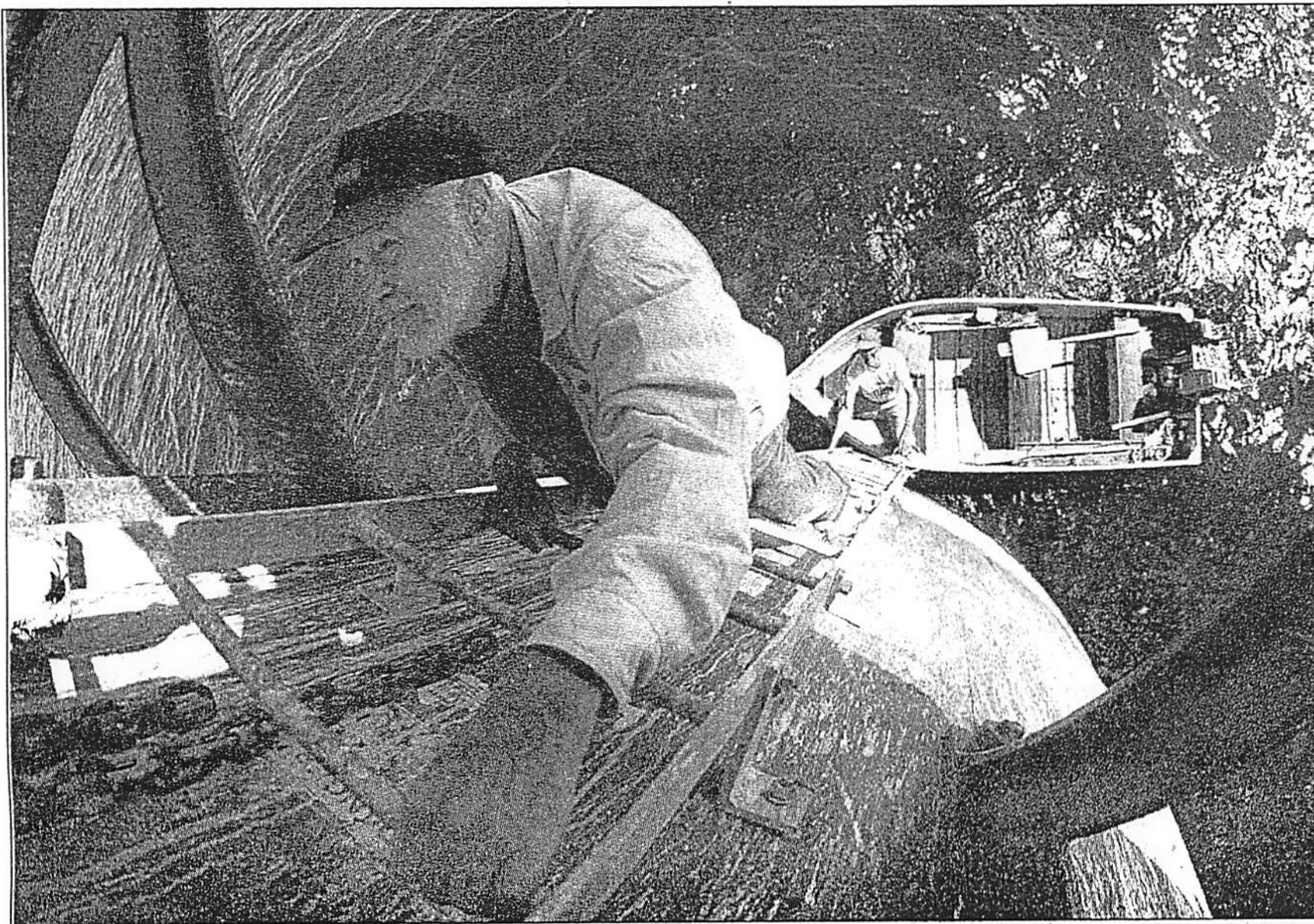
"It stood out in the middle of nowhere, completely surrounded by water," Salter wrote. "On the seaward

side . . . a wooden boat was hanging on its davits high above the high-water line. The Bug was painted a depressing dark brown, which also added to the foreboding look of the whole picture. . . . To escape any boredom that might arise here would mean an hour and a half row into Plymouth Harbor for a break — that's if the weather and tides were kind to us."

The most ardent admirers of Bug Light concede that the 35-foot, iron-clad, "sparkplug-design" light is an ugly duckling. But like the duckling in the children's story, ultimately it is loved.

Bug Light has been a steadfast friend of mariners since 1871, marking the dangerous shoal waters off Saquish Head at the entrance of Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury bays. It is now painted red below, not brown, with a white superstructure girdled by a cat-

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS / MARK WILSON

As Don Muirhead watches from their boat, Harry Salter climbs Duxbury Pier Light for the first time since serving there with the Coast Guard during World War II.

# Volunteers aim to save Bug Light

## ■ Lighthouse

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walk and capped by a lantern room from which a warning light flashes red every 5 seconds.

As Bug Light's 125th birthday approaches, a nonprofit volunteer group, Project Bug Light, has sent out an appeal to 3,500 registered boat owners in the three-bay area to help build an endowment of \$100,000 to ensure there is an annual income to keep The Bug in good repair for generations to come.

"Volunteers have gone out a dozen or more times the past couple of years," said Dr. Don Muirhead of

Duxbury, president of the volunteer group and an avid sailor. "This year, people put in 280 hours out there. But we've still got two main problems: There's a seam that's opened in the 4-inch-thick metal plates below, and we need a new covering over the wooden roof.

"Problems like that are going to come along regularly," Muirhead said. "Nothing overwhelming, but requiring a steady source of funds. And we need to keep up liability insurance as well. Before we broadened our appeal to all the local boaters, we raised about \$50,000 in a quiet kind of word-of-mouth solicitation. We'd really like everyone to come to-

gether for the rest, with donations of any size."

For almost a century, lighthouse keepers filled their days at Bug Light "chipping paint and rust, cleaning the light and lamps, cooking meals and doing maintenance work in general," recalled Salter.

But in 1964, that tradition ended. Bug Light was fully automated, and maintenance became a sometime thing at best. Vandalism also became a factor. By the early 1980s, the light had fallen into rusty disrepair — although it continued to shine — and the Coast Guard decided that rather than spend \$400,000 to restore the exterior and the sleeping quarters, living space and galley, it would be easier to simply replace the entire top half of The Bug with a cylindrical fiberglass pole — as it had done at Deer Island Light in Boston Harbor.

That announcement galvanized the local small-boat community. Project Bug Light was formed in 1983 and, with the help of US Rep. Gerry E. Studds, it convinced the Coast Guard that the locals could find the means to restore the structure and keep it maintained. The Coast Guard gave the

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HARRY SALTER, standing inside Bug  
Light, remembers 1944 storm there



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / MARK WILSON

volunteer group a five-year lease called a "restricted license," which meant that if maintenance was not up to the Coast Guard's tough standards - "shipshape and Bristol-fashion" in the old seagoing phrase - the light would revert to the government to do with as it pleased.

Project Bug Light accomplished the complete rebuilding of the catwalk and the roof in 1984 - the work done by contractor David Silvia of Plymouth - and the threat eased. The Coast Guard maintains the fourth-order Fresnel lens of the 10-inch red lantern, along with the powerful foghorn that sounds every 5 seconds in periods of poor visibility. Both run off solar-powered batteries.

Relief over the saving of the ugly duckling was apparent in the comment at the time of Edwin Heap, a Project Bug Light member whose Duxbury home looked out at The Bug: "It's an ugly old historical thing," he said. "But we're happy ... it's been saved."

Still, as the threat to Bug Light's structural integrity began to slip into memory, Project Bug Light as an organization became all but defunct, Muirhead said. Maintenance work continued, but without a formal structure for volunteers, it was spotty. The five-year lease expired in 1988, and renewal was not pursued.

In 1993, the Coast Guard was ready to go back to the fiberglass cone plan, and Muirhead and others reactivated the group, this time determined to arrange matters for the long term. A second lease was signed, running through 1998, and the endowment fund drive was launched.

"It's all hands on deck now," said Muirhead.

Meanwhile, an exhibit of photographs and memorabilia about Bug Light, some items dating to the 19th century, is recharging memories. The exhibit will remain through Oct. 4 at Plymouth Public Library. Special collection director Lee Regan said the second-floor display case has sparked interest in the light - including a visit from Harry Salter.

"I'd always had it mind to write up some of my experiences," said Salter, a retired builder. "I actually had my story written and a few copies printed out of my computer before I heard about the exhibit. But then I talked to Lee and maybe my little book can add to it. We'll see."

Salter, a native of the Sagamore section of Bourne who spent many years in the Norwell-Hanover area, has never wanted to live far from the sea. An accomplished amateur painter, his canvases are mostly of harbors and boats, salt marshes and docks.

None yet of Duxbury Pier Light - although he has indelible images in his mind of that day in 1944 when the sea tried to claim The Bug, images captured in his story of "terrible 30-foot waves ... wild and unbelievable ... hammering this stout little light station unmercifully crashing up under the catwalk and tearing away at our boat that we had previously lashed high on the davits."

Bug Light survived that storm, and Salter, Muirhead, Regan and a cast of hundreds are working to make sure The Bug survives for many more years to come.